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ABSTRACT

A rejoinder is presented to Betty Lou Dubois' article entitled, "British-Tradition English in the American University," which considers English West African English. Objection is made to the characterization of West African English in terms of errors. It is argued that there should be recognition of a "standard" West African English, a standard that is in the form of a cline. The standard would permit genuine grammatical mistakes and local idioms. Examples are presented of mistakes that have become acceptable, even to educated West Africans. It is contended that standard West African English could be characterized, not on the basis of errors, but on the basis of what is read and heard in the media and what is heard at higher education institutions. The British-tradition English must be viewed against the sociolinguistic background. An attempt is made to characterize transplanted English, with special attention to forces that encourage deviation from the language as used by native speakers. Psychological problems are described of students who mistakenly believe they speak the native speaker's version and can be understood anywhere. The kind of supportive environment needed to encourage the acquisition of American English and a second language program at Southern Illinois University are described. (SW)

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FROM BRITISH-TRADITION ENGLISH TO AMERICAN ENGLISH

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This paper is a rejoinder to Betty Lou Dubois' article entitled, "British-Tradition English in the American University" which appeared in a special issue of LEKTOS early this year (1977). It is my contention that although Dubois raised many important points in her paper, she failed to devote considerable attention to the explication of what appears to be the central problem: the exact nature of the kind of English we are dealing with. Like many other writers on the subject of transplanted English (Spencer 1971, Boadi 1971, Kirk-Greene 1971), she appears satisfied with merely pointing out the complex nature of the kind of English under discussion: "To the question of what kind of English we are talking about, no one can give a simple answer" (p. 4). It is true that at present there is no scientific survey of who speaks what kind of English in what kind of situation in West Africa; however, it is possible (as Dubois points out) to make a tentative characterization of West African English. Where I strongly disagree with Dubois is on the question of the basis for such characterization. She adopts Spencer's (1971) position of characterizing West African English in terms of "errors". For example, it is claimed that West Africans reduce vowel contrasts, simplify consonant clusters, simplify inflectional systems, and they "lack a full range of English styles and registers such as are necessary for Britons and Americans." (I certainly hope both Spencer and Dubois are not thinking of West African Pidgin English!). I think such a classification is simplistic and totally misleading since it creates the impression that the main difference between West African English and "native" English is that the former is a result of an imperfect knowledge of the latter. West Africans no longer claim to be speakers of "Queen's English". The present goal is intelligibility as more and more educational authorities are realizing that it is almost impossible to achieve native fluency in a foreign language. In this paper, I shall operate from a position that recognizes a "standard" West African English - a standard that is in the form of a cline. It is a standard that permits of a few "genuine" grammatical mistakes and lots of local idioms. I shall give examples of mistakes that have become acceptable, even to educated West Africans. The poor student who detects mistakes in the speech of "well-educated" West Africans becomes confused as he begins to wonder if these are indeed mistakes.

I think standard West African English could be characterized, not on the basis of errors, but on the basis of what we listen to on Radio and Television, what we read in Newspapers and finally, what we listen to in institutions of higher learning. In other words, the British-tradition English we are considering must be viewed against the sociolinguistic background that produced it (and not against some theory-oriented contrastive analysis); only such an approach can account for unusual constructions, mixed attitudes toward the English language, and

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such features that are said to be characteristic of West African English. Unless we view the kind of English West Africans use in the American University as a reflection of "standard" West African English, our analysis of errors would be a wasteful exercise in that we would not be in position to locate the probable source of the errors. In view of the above, I shall in this paper attempt to characterize transplanted English, paying special attention to forces that encourage deviation from the language as used by native speakers. I shall also describe the psychological problems of students who come from such environments, believing they speak the native speaker's version and wrongly assuming they would be understood anywhere. Finally, I shall describe the kind of supportive environment needed to encourage the acquisiton of American English. In all these I shall be relying heavily on my experience as an EFL/ESL teacher both in the U.S. and in West Africa. Also, I shall (like Dubois) concentrate on West African students and hope that most of the statements I make would hold true for other areas as well.

Student English Background

It is difficult to describe the "typical" foreign student in the language program in the American University. If, however, we are looking for someone with long immersion in British-tradition English, the West African serves as the ideal. For one thing, the complex linguistic situation in West Africa is probably unparalleled anywhere in the former British Empire, so that the West African student is the most disadvantaged student you could think of as far as progressing from British English to American English is concerned. Nigeria, for example, is said (by a conservative estimate) to have about six hundred "languages" - six hundred potential sources of interference in English language acquisition. If we assume that an unrelated first language cannot contribute positively to one's effort to learn another language, then we would expect the problems of the average Nigerian to be more than those of the average foreign stucent in the U.S. We must also realize that even in West Africa, problems for different speakers vary in accordance with the degree of permissiveness of the culture of the speakers of a language toward the English language. The relative stability of a particular culture is an important factor in the determination of the attitude of a people toward an alien culture.

One factor the planners of remedial English courses in American Universities have always ignored is the great diversity that characterizes the students' English background. The ideal thing would be to arrange interviews and other tests to determine the level of proficiency of each student. This is usually not done. Africans, as a group are usually assumed to be on the same level. It is true that the number of courses offered are limited and it is therefore impossible to cater for individual needs to any great extent; however, every effort should be made to at least understand the sociolinguistic background of each student so that students may be grouped according to the type of approach they require. Let me offer an example here: the Liberian student is seldom separated from other West Africans even though his

English is "different". I am not saying the Liberian student's English is necessarily better than that of other West Africans. The point is, the Liberian student has a different source for his problems, and as such the solution to his problems requires a different approach. Some of the peculiarities of Liberia are as follows: Liberia is the only black African country in which English is a native language. It is the only African country that owes its English to the United States rather than to Britain. Given the above conditions, we would expect the Liberian student to have less trouble with American English. This may be so but the Liberian student still has his problems. The problems are due to the sociolinguistic situation under which English is acquired by the student. In addition to Standard Liberian English which is used as a first language in very few Liberian homes there are at least six other types of English that constitute a probable source of the student's deviation from standard English:

1. Vernacular Liberian English (that is, Water-Street English, Water-Side English, Or Kwasai)

2. Congo - a conservative variety of Vernacular Liberian English

3. Non-native vernacular Liberian English - also a variety of Water-Side English

4. Liberian pidgin English

5. Kru pidgin English

5. Soldier English

Hancock (1974) claims that Vernacular Liberian English is the dialect that has most in common with Black English in the U.S.A. and he gives a brief description of the dialect (i.e., Vernacular Liberian English). The fact that most Liberian students speak Vernacular Liberian English would account for the fact that their speech is highly intelligible, especially to the Black American. If Liberia (a country with just a couple of local languages) can have so many varieties of English, one can imagine how complex the linguistic situation in Nigeria would be (with six hundred or more languages to contribute to the linguistic phenomenon known as Nigerian English.

I have just described in brief the complex linguistic situation that produced the Liberian student. But maybe the Liberian student is not typical; after all, he cannot be as deeply-immersed in British-tradition English as is, say, the Nigerian. Let us then choose the Nigerian student as a more legitimate representation of the West African student in the U.S.A. Also of importance is the fact that most of the West Africans in the remedial English programs are Nigerians. Let us first consider what kind of English he has been exposed to by the time he has had twelve years of schooling (which is about the least he could have to gain admission to a junior college

in the U.S.). He has been exposed to various forms of English and all these forms help to shape his own English. There are four kinds of English he is most likely to have come across:

1. Standard English (Received Pronunciation) or a rough equivalent of this - from news broadcasts on radio and TV; from newspapers and from college teachers.

2. "American" English (including Black dialect) - mainly from TV shows (Lucy, Mannix, Cannon, and John Wayne movies), records, etc. As might be expected, this kind of English poses more problems for the student since he assumes the following to be typical American English:

   "he don wan it"
   "say 'hey' one time or two time"
   "I don wan no ride"
   "you be grad student and you say you got problems"

   The student sees examples such as these as a confirmation of the England-educated teachers' claim that Americans pay little or no attention to grammatical rules. Herein lies one of the root causes of the African student's care-free attitude toward American English.

3. Localized English - from writers who try to "Africanize" their English. Examples:

   "your head is not good" (you are stupid)
   "can you not hear with your ear?" (are you deaf?)
   "their mosquitoes won't bite us" (we are not concerned)
   "don't drum for my downfall" (stop molesting me)

4. Market English - from Onitsha novels and other local publications. Here, anything goes:

   "are you does not knows?" (Don't you know?)
   "why because I like it" (because I like it)
   "are you hear?" (do you hear me?)
   "are you are" (there you are)
   "Is that?" (is that so?)

Given the role of English as an instrument of social advancement in Nigeria, it must be assumed that each student wants to speak and write intelligible English (i.e., he wants to approximate the native speaker's version). His main problem is knowing what native English really

sounds (and reads) like. He knows market English is not standard English. He easily recognizes that most of those who speak Market English are uneducated. His chief problem lies in his inability to recognize flaws in Standard English as presented through the newspapers and on radio and TV. The student has a high regard for the media (which is more or less the final authority for many). It is not unusual to hear people claim to be grammatically "correct", citing the TV as their authoritative source. We need not mention that the authoritative source lets the student down on very many occasions. With the current wave of nationalism, black awareness, cultural awakening, etc., it has become fashionable to show one's ethnic background in one's spoken English. Thus, English with a heavy "Yoruba accent" is considered a patriotic gesture. It is not unusual to find fanatics frown at English spoken with near-native accent. The pity of it all is that some of these fanatics are "educated" people. Such an attitude is by no means universal, but it is widely adopted even in colleges - and this is a cause for serious concern, especially since some of these frustrated pseudo-nationalists are teachers of English. Let us give a few examples of the kind of "standard" English the student is exposed to: (NP = Newspapers)

(a) a national archive is to be set up (TV)
(b) messages of condolence have being received (NP)
(c) one of the politicians are..(Radio)
(d) you would wish you are dead (TV)
(e) he was fined 50 naira or go to jail for three months (Newspapers)
(f) his wife delivered (i.e. had a baby) (TV, Radio, NP)
(g) running down the street a car knocked him down (NP)

A thorough examination shows that the student has certain areas of difficulty:

1. Phonological:

Most West African students speak English with a seven-vowel system in which the English central vowels disappear altogether:

˅c:˅c	˅cɛ˅c	or	˅cɔ˅c	or ˅ca˅c	(church)
bʌt	bɛt	or	bɔt		(but)

The deviation is not systematic, thus one cannot accurately predict what vowel would be substituted for a mid vowel. The vowel substituted is mostly determined by the speaker's first language but the bɛt/bɔt alternation appears to be due to pedagogical failings. The vowel æ is rendered as ɛ

thus,

mɛn (man)
man (man)

The situation is not helped by Black American and Jamaican English - both of which influence the African student in the U. S. to a large extent. I remember a Nigerian student in the Center for English as a Second Language program of Southern Illinois University asking me why Americans always say

"you're O Kay, men"

when they are speaking to one person only. We must also remember that since most african languages are syllable-timed (rather than stress-timed), the African student transfers this feature to English. The result - English with a heavy African accent. Many African students have discovered that the Asian student with only very limited knowledge of English has fewer problems getting understood in spoken language. This is not unrelated to the stress/syllable timing feature of these speakers' language. In other words, they do not have to convert from syllable timing to stress timing - a difficult feat for the African student.

Another point is that the African student does not readily recognize he does not need his clicks, and implosives and prenasalizations. Trying to include these in his speech merely complicates his problems.

2. Other (semantic, syntactic, etc.):

The African student is often unaware of the fact that certain words and expressions now have "new" meanings in American English. Hitherto, he has said "wonderful" when told someone died at the age of ninety. He does not mean he is delighted; he means "it's full of wonder". And when he says Chicago is "great to be in" he means it's such a big city his friends would probably never find their way to where he lives. And when he was informed that many selfish Nigerians live in New York city, he replied that that would not stop him "befriending" (making friends with) people. He has often said "is that?" when he meant "is that so?"; nobody ever told him such an abbreviation is illegal in English. He speaks highly of his "junior brother's senior wife" and he tells you "I'm hearing you" when he is listening to you. He "thinks it in his head" (reflects) how lucky he is to be in the U.S. In short, our Nigerian student speaks a totally different language and yet he does not know! Let us examine the typical environment in which he finds himself on arrival in the U.S.

The Educational Environment

The main problem the average African student faces on arrival in the U.S. is how to make people understand his speech. Ironically, this student understands most of what is said to him. This suggests that it is in the area of speaking skills the student needs most attention. The average African student comes to the U.S. fully confident he would not have communication problems. His optimism is not totally baseless; after all, he has passed the TOFEL, or he thinks so, Europeans and Americans in Africa have never complained about the way he spoke English. Cambridge has awarded him a School Leaving Certificate after he had passed in English and seven other subjects. He has had at least twelve years of formal education, with English as the medium of instruction. What more could one do to achieve competence in English? It is shocking for such a student to realize that no native speaker readily understands his type of English. Frustrated, he seeks the company of fellow Africans (who could do nothing to improve his English). The breakdown in communication is not wholly due to imperfect acquisition of British English. There are also "peculiarities" in American English which the native speaker doesn't even realize he has to teach the foreign learner. It is fairly easy to teach someone who has no knowledge of English the meaning of "you're welcome". But it is a little bit too demanding to expect the African student to grasp the essence of "you're welcome" when he had used "not at all" all his life. He thinks you are just being friendly when you say "you're welcome". And when you think of the fact that the African could thank you twenty times within five minutes for the same service rendered, you would begin to realize how terrible it is to have to say "you're welcome" all the time. American idioms are, in general, not too transparent. Structures like "giving a ride", "giving a jump" and "getting a break" are very difficult for the foreign learner. Yet these are the commonest expressions the student comes across outside. At the other extreme are students who, through being steady mixers, learn slang and unconventional English soon enough. Unfortunately, such expressions are rarely appropriately used.

Another factor that affects the African student psychologically is the realization that the Iranian student, the Japanese, the Vietnamese student and the Chinese students could get themselves understood by the American with relatively minor effort. As one frustrated African student once complained: "if that guy Chico (Chico and the Man) and that woman Lisa (Green Acres) could get themselves understood, how come they (the Americans) don't understand me?" The point is, the Chicano, the Puerto Rican, the Hungarian and the Mexican all function within well-defined systems and when they deviate from standard English the deviation is systematic and predictable so that the listener could adjust and easily get used to the system. On the other hand, the African student's errors are usually random and rather unpredictable. It requires a great deal of effort to offset the African student's linguistic and psychological disadvantage. Let us examine a program designed to fulfill both of these needs.

The CESL Program at Southern Illinois University

The declared aim of the Southern Illinois University Center for English as a Second Language (CESL) program is to train students from foreign countries who intend to continue their studies in the American University. Established in 1966 as a continuing service formerly offered by ELS (English Language Services Inc., of Washington, D.C.), it aims at making the foreign student sufficiently adequate in language skills to be able to compete with anyone anywhere in the U.S. educational system. The CESL is adequately staffed and all language skills are taught: listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. Fluency is emphasized and the ability to understand and speak American English is stressed. Classes are limited to ten students each to encourage individual effort and also to ensure maximum individual attention. There is an elaborate orientation program designed to help the foreign student recognize American values and fit into the American society. Special advisors in the CESL program help individual students with day-to-day problems of living in a new culture, and are available at all times to help students having problems with their adjustments. Programs that encourage acculturation and education are initiated. As a rule, a foreign student is housed in a single dormitory and assigned an American roommate. The benefits of this arrangement cannot be overemphasized. A CESL student is sometimes placed with an American family during Thanksgiving and other vacations. Surely, this is a very efficient system - almost too good to be true. The program takes care not only of the students' linguistic needs, but also of their psychological needs as well. In an atmosphere of this nature, the West African student has a slight advantage in that he can readily participate in social activities and quickly come to the realization that he might have to "unlearn" many of the things he learned before. Within a short time, he recognizes the need to be more careful in spoken as well as written English. He now realizes that the Americans would not train their ears to his own English; he would have to learn to observe grammatical rules if he wants to be understood. The S.I.U. program provides the best one could desire by way of striking a balance between second language learning and acculturation.

Conclusion

It has been shown that in addition to the problems inherent in second language learning, the West African student has other problems, mainly psychological. With a good program like the one at SIU, half the problem is already solved. However, West Africans need to realize that until a "West African" English is fully described and adopted by West Africans, native speakers of English would expect users to conform to the rules of the language as used by native speakers. West Africans must stop "expecting" to be understood. Their type of English may be adequate for West Africa but in a place like the U.S., they have to realize that West African standard is no longer the standard.

British-tradition is perhaps a misleading term for the kind of

English we are speaking of here. The English is British-influenced but the deviations are sometimes so marked that one feels there is nothing British about the structure produced. Finally, we may repeat that if the psychological and the sociological backgrounds of the students are analyzed and utilized in planning the courses of instruction, we would achieve more positive results by way of proficiency; we might even learn a lot of things about how the foreign student manages to prevent co-existent systems from overlapping.

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